RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN SYRIA

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2022

ABSTRACT

Syria, due to its history, is a multi-religious society which when given independence had each religious group clawing for power over the others. This political unrest that lasted for decades, when aided by the Arab Spring and successive military use on the citizens, incited the majority religious group into a civil war. This Crisis has attracted external parties who view the civil war as an opportunity to fulfil their religious or political goals, parties like the Islamic State (IS). Religious Extremism is the problem this study aims to tackle; how it is caused and how it motivates people into committing mass atrocities. There are not many works that look into the factors that causes the Syrian Crisis and attempts to find those similarities in the Nigerian context, this Study aims to add to that field. The Study investigated the causes of Religious extremism in order to discover how to tackle it before it becomes a crisis.

This study utilized Qualitative Research Methodology. This study used news reports, journal articles, and online articles. The Study utilizes mostly electronic materials in order to have a current look into the situation in Syria.

In the conduction of this research, it was found that Religious Extremism is rarely the cause but a tool used to justify or incite people into committing atrocities.

Religious Extremism is caused by factors which theological, cultural, psychological and political. The Islamic State's activities are governed by a religious ideology which aims to establish an Islamic Caliphate governed by Sharia law. The Study recommended the reduction of religious identity salience by political and social leaders by preventing the use of religion in order to gain approval for political actions, this can be done through education and international movements for change.

Word Count – 295 Words

Key words: Religion, Extremism, Religious Extremism, Islamic State, Syria.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The area that constitutes the state of Syria had never been a political entity or constituted a sovereign body until its independence from France in 1946. It was either under an empire or controlled by external powers throughout history, these include the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks, British and French. It was at the centre of an empire only once during the Umayyad Caliphate in the 700-800 A.D. However, that period left Syria with its Islamic heritage. (Polk, 2013)

For many centuries, the Syrian society has been predominantly Muslim. Syria also has been a haven for small groups whose differences from one another were defined on religious and ethnic terms. Most of these ethnic communities were left off from former invasions or migrations. For most of the last five hundred years, what is Syria today was a part of the Ottoman Empire which included groups of Orthodox Catholic, and other Christians; Alawites, Ismailis, and other sorts of Shia Muslims; Yazidis; Kurds; Jews; and Druze who lived in enclaves close to Sunni Muslim Arabs. (Polk, 2013)

Syria was a part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire from 1516 until the end of World War 1. The Arab army were initially promised the area that is now Syria by Britain and France when they helped defeat the Ottomans and captured Damascus. However, the Sykes-Picot Agreement which was held secretly in 1916 divided the parts of the Ottoman Empire which was outside

the Arabian Peninsula between France and Britain. Therefore, in 1920, Syria and Lebanon were given to France[1].

Between the years of 1920 and 1946, the French divided the colony into administrative and political units based on regional and sectarian divisions. The actions of the French fostered sectarian, class and ethnical separatism, widening the rift between the majority Sunnis and various minorities by recruiting members of the Alawite and Druze minorities (Fildis, 2012). Therefore, at Syria's independence in 1946, it did not have a central authority that could serve as a unifying point for identity and loyalty. (Darwisheh, 2013)

Syria's depraved political and economic situation from their Pre- to Post-independence eras adding to their defeat in the 1948 Arab war against Israel fostered the conflict between politicians and army officers who exploited the public's discontent to provide legitimate reasons for their military takeovers. This created a succession of military coups; there were more than 10 successful coups in Syria between 1949 and 1970. The instability of the State and increasing sectarianism in politics eventually caused the dissolution of the Syrian Arab Republic. (Darwisheh, 2013)

The Assad Regime was the answer to the weakness of the statehood and political life of the Syrians. The regime was established by Hafez al-Assad, who is the father of the current leader in 1970. The Assad family are from the Alawite minority and they consider themselves as the 'chosen people' (Polk, 2013). However, the Orthodox Muslims regard them as

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[1] Mohammed B. E. SAAIDA, The Jordanian policy towards the Syrian crisis 2011-2016, Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020, pp. 150-152.

heretics. In the Ottoman pluralist system this difference was inconsequential, but as Syrians, they struggled for a sense of identity and began to fear the cooperation of other minorities with foreigners. Being an Alawite or a Christian or a Jew made people feel segregated. Therefore, the nationalist Baath Party[2] was the sensible choice for Hafez al-Assad as it offered, or seemed to offer, the means to overcome his origination from a minority community and to point toward a solution to the sectarianism of Syrian politics. He enlisted and eventually became its leader. (Polk, 2013)

Hafez al-Assad had a goal which was to try to bridge the rich and poor through a new version of socialism, and connect the Muslims and the minorities in the state through an accommodating concept of Islam. He wanted to create a modern and secular society defined by Arabism and not ethnicity or religion. All these were against the views and ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood. (Polk, 2013)

The constitution of the state even predating the French empire had stipulated that only a Muslim could hold the Presidency. Hafez al-Assad therefore came up with a plan to grasp Muslim opinion. He redefined the clause that stated that only a president could rule and changed the definition of Islam to say that Islam "is a religion of love, progress and social justice, of equality for all…" (Polk, 2013) He also made a respected Shia Islamic jurist-consult issue a finding that Alawites were Shia Muslims. (Polk, 2013)

 The Muslim Brotherhood did not take this action lightly. They initiated riots throughout country, and these riots became bloody in the city of Hama. Assad tried to contain the chaos by granting subsidies on food and reducing the disapproved political police. However, the

[2] Borgi, S. (2016, April 23). Syria News: Economic Impact of the Syrian Civil War. Retrieved March 11, 2017, from Economic Calender: http://www.economiccalender.com/2016/04/23/syria-news-economic-impacts-of-the-syrian-civil-war/

fundamental issue was not taken care of. The Muslim Brotherhood underwent terrorist operations on the government officers and buildings and on Assad's closest collaborators with exploding car bombs, including the office of the Prime Minister. (Polk, 2013)

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